PYRAMID SCHEME

The Third Programme was the original “minority interest” channel, justifying its existence in similar terms to BBC2 and Channel Four years later. In this respect, the controversial “fencing off” aspect was almost the point. It may have been a shame (for Reith at least) to abandon the old mixed no-choice eat-your greens broadcasting philosophy that brought the listeners everything the Director General thought was good for them in one handy, and more importantly inescapable, package, that was then and this was now.

The only antebellum alternative to the National Programme had been the Regional one, and that only existed for technical rather than content-based reasons. But then the War broke out and broke the audience apart, forcing the BBC to truly divide its channels for the first time - initially along relatively simple quasi-geographical lines with the creation of the Home Service and the Forces Programme. There was nothing stopping anyone with the right frequencies from listening to either, of course, and the two stations inevitably developed their own characters, and more importantly their own listeners. After half a decade of that, the public had become used to it. Multi-channel was the new normal.

Haley preferred it that way anyway. Where Ogilvie, Graves and Foot were men dutifully doing a job, following in the founder’s giant footsteps, the former newspaperman was the first DG since Reith to have a vision comparable to that of the great man. To his mind, “mixed broadcasting” had already been abandoned out of necessity by the War and there was no point forcing the genie back into the bottle. Better to accept the new status quo and deal with its consequences, chief among them for Haley being the gradual loss of the sort of high-fibre arts coverage that now had a place of its own in the Third Programme. Moreover, it should be a place that transcended traditional social strata, as he explained in a lengthy column introducing the Third in the Radio Times:

“*Its whole content will be directed to an audience that is not of one class but that is perceptive and intelligent...the most intelligent, receptive people in all classes, persons who value artistic experience all the more because of the limited opportunities they have of enjoying it.”***

He had IQ and cultural literacy more in mind than the usual class divisions. In his most starry-eyed futuristic visions, Haley hoped to re-engineer British society altogether, replacing the classic economic separators with cultural ones. He envisioned a “cultural pyramid”, served (and where necessary sculpted) by the new three-pronged structure of the BBC’s output. The populist Light Programme would serve as the base, the Home service the creamy middle, and the new Third

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Programme was the pointy jewel at the top. The listenership narrowed as the classiness, intellectual rigour and bran content of the programming increased, until at the apex you might find a three-hour showcase of Edgard Varese works for Peruvian anal flute, ultimately deliberately tuned into by about seven people. If that wasn't silly.

Instead of having programming oscillate up and down through the pyramid's levels on a single service - Stravinsky juxtaposed with Gershwin, Strindberg followed by ITMA - there was a definitive separation. Reith's notion was that the former system would help educate, elucidate and culturally enrich the audience, largely from their lack of choice. Haley saw this as tantamount to force-feeding them castor oil. (It's possible that Reith would have used the same metaphor, but with a different attitude). His pyramid was designed to be two things: realistic, even reflective - this was, Haley believed, how the country's listeners were already arranged, and if that was the case then all he was doing was reacting. But more importantly, aspirational.

It wasn't just a pyramid, it was a ziggurat. The majority of the audience were at the foot where lurked the likes of Housewives' Choice, Dick Barton and Bandstand. The Third Programme was intended to serve as a gleaming lure at the ziggurat's apex, something to encourage the Light Programme listeners to make the climb through the Home Service, discovering the likes of Tchaikovsky and Anthony Trollope on their way to Monteverdi, Louis MacNeice and John Tresidder Sheppard discussing various masterpieces of Greek Theatre. In this way would the country be improved intellectually and culturally - with the final intended result being a complete inversion of the pyramid - a "Third Programme Nation", as described in hushed tones by the new Education Secretary, Ellen Wilkinson. Even at the time, this seemed rather unlikely.

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